

"THE STORY OF OUR LIVES FROM YEAR TO YEAR."

# ALL THE YEAR ROUND

## A Weekly Journal

CONDUCTED BY

CHARLES DICKENS.

No. 324.—THIRD SERIES. SATURDAY, MARCH 16, 1895. PRICE TWOPENCE.

### PRISONERS OF SILENCE.

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#### CHAPTER XLIII.

THE midday express from Alnchester to London was tearing steadily across the country. It was a sunny May day, and even the commonplace landscape which stretched away on either side was beautiful with blossom. But there were two passengers by whom, though one of the two never moved her eyes as they gazed fixedly out of the window, the loveliness about them passed absolutely unheeded. Alone in a first class carriage, facing one another as they sat in the corners on either side of a window, were Bryan Armitage and Constance Vallotson.

At twelve o'clock on the night before, North had come to Bryan's rooms with a brief account of Mrs. Vallotson's collapse and of her one request; and with an enquiry, equally brief, as to whether it would be possible to Bryan to go down to Alnchester and fetch Constance. Bryan had made it possible, and at five o'clock in the morning he had left London. He had reached Dr. Vallotson's house at about ten o'clock, and on the two hours that followed he never cared to dwell. Even now, as he sat opposite Constance in the train, he could hardly realise that she was actually with him. He was taking her bodily presence to her mother's side; so much concession had been wrung from her—and through her from her father—by such strongly worded representation as had never issued from Bryan's lips in all his life before. But her soul, as he knew well, remained untouched. Bryan's honest face

was a trifle colourless and weary. He had had no sleep on the previous night, and he had compressed a double journey into the shortest possible space of time. But far stronger than any trace of physical fatigue, as he glanced now and again at his companion's averted profile, was the pain and anxiety which made him look stronger and more manly by ten years.

The change which the past eight months had wrought in the face so stubbornly turned from him was as great as it was pitiful to see. From Constance's small brown features the girlishness had gone for ever. They were thin, pinched, and sallow. Sharpened and accentuated to the extreme point of their unpleasant possibilities, those traits of expression which had been laughable when softened by the charm of youthfulness stood out now frankly confessed as grave faults of character. The self-confidence had become hard self-assertion. The superiority had become narrow intolerance. The pronounced little chin and nose witnessed to the steady growth of a sour contempt which condemned wholesale. The whole face would have been simply and wholly disagreeable to look at, if it had not been for an indescribable wretchedness that pervaded it, that lurked in the hard dark eyes—terribly like her mother's—and seemed to create their sharpness.

The journey was half over and she had hardly moved or spoken. Bryan had tried to induce her to eat the sandwiches with which he had provided himself for her benefit, only to meet with a monosyllabic refusal. The light was beginning to change from the full radiance of midday to the first suggestion of afternoon shadow; he had been watching her for some time in silence when he leaned a little forward in his seat and spoke.

"Connie," he said quickly and diffidently, "do you think that any fellow creature stands beyond the pale of our pity?"

She turned her head and looked at him for a moment, her face unmoved and contemptuous.

"Perhaps not," she said; her voice was hard and thin. "I have not considered the question."

"If you had heard your mother's story told of some one with whom you were unconnected, wouldn't you—even if you had thought most of the other people on whom the blow fell—have pitied her a little, too?"

"You are arguing quite unnecessarily," she returned. "I do pity my mother. Otherwise I should not be here."

Her lips set themselves into a firm implacable line as she turned her head deliberately away, as though to close the conversation. But a quick exclamation broke from Bryan.

"We use the same word, Connie dear," he said; "but we don't mean the same thing. Pity, as I understand it, means tenderness, sympathy. It means seeing misery when we should otherwise only see wrong-doing; it means wanting to relieve that misery. It's pity like that that holds us all together. Don't we all need it every day of our lives?"

She moved her hand impatiently on her knee.

"That's a theory," she said, in a low, sharp tone. "Theories are quite useless. They have nothing to do with things as they are!"

He looked at her for a moment with a vague uncertain light, struggling with the perplexity of distress with which his eyes were full. Ever since they met that morning—meeting after an interval of nearly ten months—he had been seeking blindly and most unhappily for some clue which should bring him in touch with this new Constance, about whom his instinct, only, could detect any trace of the Constance of old. Only Bryan, who had known her so well and so tenderly perhaps, could have detected the clue afforded by the sweeping assertion to which he had just listened. And only so straightforward a nature could have pursued it with such simple courage.

"It all depends on which one begins with," he said quietly. "If one arranges one's theories from life it's all right enough. But if one develops theories first, and looks to make life square with them——"

"No one would be so foolish as to do that!" she interrupted.

"Not knowingly," he said gently. "Certainly not."

She turned with an irritable movement, and fixed her eyes once more on the country; and Bryan paused to consider his next words. Hardly a moment had passed, however, before she spoke again.

"You think I'm very hard, Bryan? You're quite right, I am. I cannot help it! I don't want to help it! I am not going to argue the point with you! Men are always sentimental about women like my mother! I simply ask you if you suppose I wanted to feel as I do! You know I didn't! You know I stood on higher ground than other girls about such questions. I could reason. Do you suppose it was pleasant to me to be shaken to the most contemptible depth of feeling?"

She had spoken bitterly and passionately, her set manner breaking up with every word as though the contact with her old playfellow influenced her in some subtle way. And as she finished, throwing the question at him fiercely, self-contemptuously, something of the old Constance, the Constance whom he had played with, argued with, and loved ever since he could remember, seemed to lurk in every tumultuous line of the small pinched face. Bryan flushed hotly, but he spoke very simply and steadily.

"Connie," he said, "that's it! That's why you don't quite see the rights of things. You could reason, but it's no use to reason unless you can feel too. When feeling seems contemptible to one, one's all wrong. Look here, dear," he went on, speaking very earnestly and with a great effort, "you say you stood on higher ground than other girls? Now, that's the question! What is higher ground, and how does one get there?"

"Knowledge is higher ground," she answered defiantly. "A calm capacity for clear thought, for facing points that are usually ignored. And one gets there, of course, by right of brain power and its proper use."

"You're wrong, Connie," he said. "Look here, I don't like talking to you of things like this, but we must have it out! Knowledge alone isn't higher ground, and brain power alone will never bring us up to it."

"What will, then?" she demanded scornfully.

"Sympathy, I think," he said. "The sympathy that comes of trying to do what

we ought ourselves and knowing how horribly hard it is. And higher ground is higher insight and experience, that's all! Don't you see, Con, that even if you had known as much as you thought you did it wouldn't have given you insight; phrases and facts can't do that. It's got to grow, gradually, you know."

There was a moment's silence and then she said dubiously but thoughtfully:

"Then do you mean that if I had had more—insight—I should have been able to take it more as I should have wished, more calmly?"

A sharp ejaculation broke from Bryan.

"Good heavens, no!" he said in a quick, moved voice. "Connie, can't you see at all what I mean? Insight doesn't make one calm in the presence of sin and misery, it only makes one's feeling deeper and tenderer."

"Is that a better thing?"

He leaned forward impulsively and took her hands in his.

"You know it is," he said. "If you could forget all the phrases that made playthings of these things for you before you could realise what they meant, if you could get outside the narrow conceptions you've taken for truth, and let your womanliness have fair play, you wouldn't want me to tell you so."

She turned her face away from him sharply, but she did not withdraw her hands. They were trembling. There was a long silence, and then she said in a strange, uneven voice:

"Do you mean that she is really dying?"

He had watched her face, and the transition of her ideas was no surprise to him. His fingers closed more firmly round her little shaking hands.

"Yes, dear!"

"And she asked for me?"

"Yes."

She looked round slowly; the small brown features were quivering.

"Bryan," she said tremulously, "I wish—I wish you had come home sooner. I have wanted you very much."

And then—they neither of them quite knew how it happened—they kissed each other for the first time since Connie was ten years old.

The afternoon shadows were growing long as they drove rapidly through the London streets. Constance was very pale and quiet, and her face was eloquent of an awestruck suspense. Bryan, too, was grave and silent; and not a word had passed

between them when the cab finally slackened speed, and Bryan looked quickly up at the windows of the house. He turned to her instantly and said gently:

"It's all right!"

Then he helped her out; the door was opened to them almost at the same moment, and Constance caught nervously at his arm.

"Where is North?" she said tremulously.

"When shall I have to see North?"

He had never seen her shaken or unnerved before, but it seemed to come quite naturally to Bryan to steady and support her.

"There he is," he said tenderly, looking along the hall to the top of the staircase. "He is coming down to us now."

A man's step sounded on the stairs, and at the same instant North came within sight. Bryan felt the girl start violently, and knew that she was shaking from head to foot. He drew her gently on, and the next moment North had reached them. He held out his hand to Constance with grave kindness.

"I am very glad to see you," he said in a low voice.

"We are in time?" said Bryan.

"Yes!"

North opened the dining-room door as he spoke the one grave word, and tacitly suggested that Constance should go in. She obeyed him mechanically, but, once inside the room, she turned and spoke in a subdued voice.

"May I not go up?"

North looked at her white, agitated face.

"You are very tired," he said. "I would rather that you rested for a little, and had something to eat first." He paused and added very kindly: "She will not know you, Constance. She is unconscious."

"But—she will?"

"Yes," he answered, "I hope so."

A meal was waiting for the travellers, and, as if influenced in spite of herself by his manner, Constance tried to follow North's injunction to eat something. She was quite composed, though she was still very pale when, half an hour later, she said hurriedly, but not unsteadily:

"North—let me see my mother now."

Again he looked at her carefully.

"Are you rested?" he said.

"Yes!"

"You understand that she is quite unconscious?"

"Yes!"

He rose, and Constance followed him

without a word out of the room and up the stairs. With his hand on the door of Mrs. Vallotson's room he stopped, and looked round at the girl with a great pity in his eyes.

"Constance," he said, "are you prepared to find her greatly changed?"

She nodded. He saw that she could not speak, and that delay was but a cruel kindness. He opened the door and led the way into the room.

The quiet that had brooded over the house for all those months seemed to be concentrated at last between the four walls of that one room. It was large and square, conventional in its appointments, and adapting itself easily in its bare neatness to the characteristics of a sick-room. The sun had set, no afterglow had caught the windows, and the fading light had a sombre effect. The nurse, whose quiet movement, as she rose on North's entrance, hardly seemed to touch the silence, was seated by the bedside; and on the bed, rigid and motionless, lay the only other figure that the room contained.

North did not hesitate. He led the way straight up to the bedside, and Constance, with her hands clenched tightly together, followed him. North did not look at her. He heard a low strangled catch of the breath, and then the quiet settled down upon the room again as they stood there side by side, gazing down upon the face of the woman who was the mother of them both.

Was it indeed her mother? Looking at those sunken features, wrapped in their impenetrable insensibility as in a dreadful mask; those features blank and expressionless but for the lines of resolution and endurance graven too deeply ever to be effaced; a sense of unutterable strangeness fell upon Constance. She could not speak, she could not feel; a chill of awe had fallen on her, and all her faculties seemed frozen. At last she became aware that North was speaking to her. She looked up slowly, and knew that he repeated his words.

"She suffers nothing while she is like this," he said very gently. "Come down now. You shall see her again by-and-by."

He laid his hand upon her arm, and drew her out of the room. Glancing at her face as he closed the door he saw that it was working convulsively; but no sound came from her until, as he opened the dining-room door again, Bryan Armitage started up and came eagerly towards them.

And then she broke into a low, bitter cry.

"Oh, Bryan, my mother! my mother! Oh, Bryan, Bryan!"

The next moment she was clinging to him in a passion of sobs and tears, and North shut the door softly and left them.

Two hours passed before he came downstairs again, and then Bryan met him in the hall. Constance was quite worn out, he said; she would go to bed if North would promise that she should be called if there should be any sign of consciousness. A little stir succeeded in the house; and then North, who was to spend the night in the sick-room, acceded to Bryan's urgent entreaties that he would spare himself during the brief interval that yet remained before his watch began; and the two sat together, silent companions, in the dining-room.

Ten o'clock struck, and North rose.

"Good night, Bryan," he said. "Go to bed."

"I shall go to sleep whether I go to bed or not," returned the young man ruefully. "Good night, North!"

The servants were moving about below, shutting up the house. As North went up the stairs the quiet, subdued sounds gradually died away; he heard, as he opened the door of the sick-room, the door of the room in which a bed had been improvised for Bryan Armitage close softly; and out of the quiet of night, as it fell upon the house, he passed into a quiet deeper still.

No perceptible change showed itself in the room, except inasmuch as it was lighted now by a lamp so placed that the slightest change in the face of the patient would be visible to the watchers. The figure on the bed lay in the same blank stupor. As North entered the room the nurse was standing by the pillows looking attentively into the unconscious face. She turned as he approached, giving place to him silently and watching him furtively. He studied the face on the pillow quietly for a few seconds, then he asked a few brief technical questions.

His catechism finished, he turned from the patient to the nurse.

"I need not keep you any longer," he said. "You had better go to bed at once."

The woman hesitated, and her eyes wandered to the bed.

"There is a change, sir, don't you think?"

She spoke diffidently, but it was eloquent



of the infinite remoteness of the figure on the bed that neither of the speakers had lowered their voices beyond their natural pitch.

"Yes," answered North quietly.

He said no more, and the woman turned away. At the door she stopped.

"Good night, sir!"

"Good night!"

The door opened and shut. He heard her step pass on up the stairs; he heard the sound of a closing door; silence descended for the last time that night upon the house.

Alone, in the heart of the silence; alone with that rigid figure, eloquent alike of the mysteries of life and death; alone with the tragic centre of his whole life's meaning; North Branston looked into his mother's face, and read there the beginning of the end.

The change there manifested was very slight. The colour had altered indefinitely, and the lips looked pinched and sunken; but to the trained eye the indications were distinct enough. Looking down now upon her unbroken stillness, North knew that it was not the insensibility induced by anæsthetics that held her; that it was the final stupor of exhaustion. Absolutely motionless she lay there. She had been a fighter all her life; strong, bold, and resolute. She had fought against the world, and conquered. She had fought against the hand of God, and fallen. She lay now as the weakest and the strongest creatures upon earth must lie, so touched by the lord of life and death; and the sands of her life ran slowly out, unheeded of her any more, not to be checked by any power on earth. Not to be checked; not to be retarded in their passing. They might move rapidly, they might move slowly; but the regulation of their movement had passed beyond the reach of human hands. Unhastily, unfalteringly, the work of life tended towards its final consummation—death.

The weeks of preparation seemed to fade away out of North Branston's life; the world and all it held seemed to recede; leaving him face to face with that which each moment as it passed was bringing surely nearer. Not that material dissolution alone, with which he was only too familiar; not death the scientific process, death the man-explained, the man-belittled; but death the teacher, death the guide, death the eternal mystery, at once the Alpha and the Omega of life.

The stillness of the room grew deeper. Mechanically, North had seated himself in the chair beside the bed. He sat there motionless, almost, as the figure which he watched. The solemn shadow of that which was to come crept from the face upon the pillow, and rested on the face that watched it. In the moments when the veil of life wears thin, and that which is behind stirs, dimly seen and faintly apprehended, the spirit of man humbles itself and questions not.

She was going; as surely and as visibly, as though he had seen her bodily form fading into nothingness before his eyes, she was passing away. The severance which no efforts of their own could have accomplished was drawing nearer and nearer; the severance of two existences condemned to crush each other, and in the process doomed to crush themselves. She was going. The riddle of the blind, rebellious, conquered life was to be solved at last; but the solution was for her and not for him. She was going.

The night had passed away. The dawn was stealing slowly into the room when North rose suddenly. For a moment he stood beside the bed, his eyes, deep and intense, fixed upon the face on the pillow. It was touched now, for the first time, by a slight suggestion of change. Still without moving his eyes he stretched out his hand and laid his fingers on her wrist. The beat of her pulse had altered. He felt a slight vibration as of movement shiver through her, and then the dead insensibility of her face slowly relaxed. Her eyes opened and looked full into his.

The wings of death beat through the air of life, and the vibrations thus called into being thrill through man with an influence which he may not fathom. In that supreme moment, as the eyes of the mother and son met, the tie between them rose, asserting itself in all its power for the first time, as for the last. It looked through the faint cloud of old antipathy in the dull eyes of the dying woman; and it responded solemnly in the eyes of the man who leaned over her. No thought of the daughter she had loved stirred in her; no thought of the sister who should have stood beside him penetrated his consciousness.

"Lift me up!"

Her breath was coming in long, painful gasps, and even as he raised her in his arms a grey pall fell between spirit and spirit as the strong woman's frame made its last struggle for life. She was conscious

still, but only dimly. He saw her lips move, and he bent his head to catch the words they uttered.

"... never be altered! It can—never—be altered!"

Her face was changing with a dreadful rapidity. Solemn grey shadows had gathered about her mouth, and for a moment she lay in his arms, long shudders shaking her from head to foot. Then her indomitable spirit seemed to fight its way back once more through the disabilities that were thronging its course. Her eyes were open, and recognition struggled back into them as she stared up into his face.

"Is it—you?" she said. "I suppose—I ought to say—I—"

She had never asked for pardon in her life, and she did not do it in the moment of death. But on every line of her face—sullen and reluctant even then, but unmistakable—the word was stamped.

And, as North touched her forehead gently with his lips, mother and son parted.

#### CHAPTER XLIV.

THE stress and strain of feeling must subside. The wave which carries man beyond the limits of his reason, the wave which sweeps him from the foothold of his human knowledge and bears him onward on the bosom of the illimitable and unfathomable ocean which flows about humanity, has but one moment of perfect flood; and then it must recede again and leave him stunned, perhaps, and breathless on the shore of life. If it has raised him to a vantage ground from which the ocean in its majesty is discerned a little clearer; if the remembrance of that measured rush and sweep of many waters lingers in his heart, a solemn music to which his work is henceforth timed; its work is done. Man's place is on the shore until the ocean take him to itself for ever; it is on the shore that his labour waits him.

Quietly and steadily, with no unnecessary words, North Branston gathered up the broken threads of his life and bound them into the one strand by which he could go onwards into the future—the strand of work. He stood alone. The one all dominating tie was broken, but its shadow laid upon his life a sentence of unchanging isolation. No individual hopes or fears, cares or responsibilities were left him. But, losing these, he had passed through the discipline of struggle and pain into touch with humanity itself. It is the eyes that

have looked pain in the face until the meaning of those inexorable lines have slowly shadowed itself forth before their straining gaze, that see below the surface in the struggling lives around them. It is the hands that have wrestled inch by inch and hour by hour with despair by which the burden, large or small, which weighs upon the hearts of all men here can be most gently and most pitifully lightened. Most gently, most pitifully, and most unconsciously. To the man who has read one sentence in the book of life, the years that follow are one unceasing struggle to spell out yet other words upon the page which he will some day understand in full perfection. The daily duties brought by life are the means by which the struggle carries itself on, unknown and unsuspected, in proportion as the nature of the man is deep and still.

North's life, in one sense, was over. It was a natural instinct that prompted him to begin the life that lay before him still in a new country. It was a natural impulse that prompted him to place the seal of material distance upon that infinitely deeper distance that lay between him and the woman whom he loved. So that he had work, it mattered not at all to him where that work lay. He heard of a life appointment vacant in India; applied for, and obtained it.

The love that fears to suffer, the love that says, "We will not meet again, we cannot bear the pain!" is but a faint shadow of the love that says, "We will part. We will loose each other's hands bravely, knowing that in that last touch we have gained strength to live!"

That he and Eve Karslake must meet once again was a thought that lay deep and inarticulate in North's heart. But the word which brought them face to face came not from him, but from her. She wrote to him. She knew that he was going, she said, and would he come to her before he went?

It was a cold June afternoon, a week before he sailed, when they stood together for the last time. They met very quietly, talked, as people will when there is that passing within before which speech must fail, of surface matters, of his appointment, of his voyage, of her plans for the coming winter; their voices rising and falling with level monotony, their faces very still. Then there came a pause. It was broken by Lady Karslake, and as she spoke her voice caught a little for the first time.

"Did you ever know," she said, "that I went to see her?"

There was no need of any name. North Branston started slightly and looked at her.

"No," he said.

She told him in a few brief words of her visit to Mrs. Vallotson, and then there was another pause. And in the pause North rose silently. Lady Karlake rose also. Their faces were quite white now. The last moment was at hand, and they knew it. Then, quite suddenly, she spoke, her eyes fixed full upon him.

"You said life held a purpose," she said. "What did you mean? Our hearts are broken, and our lives are spoilt. You have been stronger always than I! If there is any meaning in the ghastly riddle of our existence, make me see it."

It was the supreme appeal of a soul long dormant struggling towards consciousness through agony and darkness; and the soul in North Branston rose to answer it.

"I cannot make you see it," he said steadily. "Life must do that."

"Life!" she said; there was a sharp note of anguish in her voice, but her eyes looked into his as though she read there more than his man's lips could utter. "What does life mean for us?"

"Just that," he answered gently. "Learn-ing to understand."

"How?"

"By patience," he answered. "Patience with ourselves; patience with the lives about us; patience with the darkness which is the shadow cast by light."

Her breath was coming quickly and heavily, and for a moment she did not speak. The strained demand of her face had broken up, softened into a yearning, difficult perception. At last she moved. She stretched out both hands towards him.

"I am behind you!" she said. "A long, long way behind. For myself I only feel the darkness. But I see the light through you!"

### TOURAINE IN AUTUMN.

SEPTEMBER is certainly the time to be in Touraine, whether you are "chasseur," interested in the vines, or merely the common sentimental tourist hungering for sights. It is a good thing to be a sportsman in France: the railway companies make special allowances to you, and you and your gun are regarded with some of

the admiration exacted by the military in this land so mindful of comparatively recent war troubles. One is disposed to think, after some acquaintance with the vast areas of vines here in the heart of France, that it is good also to be either a vineyard proprietor or a dealer in wines. And most assuredly the tourist will here find enough for him to do, what with castles on all sides of him, and the legends and histories that pertain to them, and the rich—if rather flat—landscapes between the Indre and the Loire. One is not ordinarily in academic mood when bent on holiday making; but it is further worthy of mention that they speak excellent French in this valley of the Loire. A well-bred native of Tours does not clip his syllables. The "Touraine mouth" is to the alien as precious as the "bocca Romana" in the Pope's city to the student of Italian.

The Tourainers themselves are comforting to behold: a stalwart, brown-faced people, with contentment deep set in them. The women in their blue cotton gowns, white mutes, and unwieldy wooden shoes, are picturesque enough for anything, if their dark sloe-like eyes and ready smiles be also taken into account. One sees fair faces among the younger girls: Madonna-like faces. It were easy to fancy that Agnes Sorel, "the fairest of the fair," resembled the best of them when she too was young and had not yet caught the eye of a King. As for the men, they are what one would expect them to be in such a natural garden: a hard-working class, prone to rejoice in all the festive leisure they can obtain. They love their native province passionately; it is difficult to realise what they must have felt when a quarter of a century ago the Prussian soldiers trod their fields and vineyards under foot and burned their homesteads. "I do not believe," said one of them to me the other day, "there can be any other country in the world better to live in than Touraine. We have so much sun even in winter. The climate is so mild, and all things grow in it." He spoke at a venture, having never been out of Touraine, and he did not desire to see if actual experience outside his own province might not abate his enthusiasm about the land of abbeys, and castles, and good grapes.

Tours, the capital, is in keeping with the district that looks up to it. There is nothing meretricious about it. In some respects, it is distinctly an old-fashioned place. It is not, for instance, lit by electricity, and, though well frequented by

visitors, it has kept free from the cosmopolitan tone that tourist resorts as a rule acquire. Its sixty thousand inhabitants are not slaves to time. It is nothing to them that the city clocks seem to have an inveterate dislike to run in concord. This weakness is, however, carried rather far; even the station clocks differ, so that in going from one to the other you may chance to incur the fate of the man between two stools—both insecure. As one would suppose in a place so hallowed by ecclesiastical tradition, Tours is more religious than most French towns of its size. The deep bell of the Cathedral of St. Martin booms solemnly over the acres of dull red roofs below its belfry, the plane-trees and elms which are still—as when our Evelyn visited the place and declared that “no city in France exceeds it in beauty and delight”—the pride of Tours, and the broad silver ribbon of the Loire, with its stately bridges and sandy islets. Side by side with shops for the sale of the most modern of French novels are shops in which crucifixes, gay prints of saints, and devotional books seem offered with more confidence than the fiction in the other windows.

A market day in the city is well worth experiencing. The villagers from contiguous parts come into Tours in quaint, lumbering old wooden wains and alight in the back streets, which still preserve certain of their mediæval qualities. Then how they talk, to be sure! Our own countryfolk are prodigies in this respect on the like occasions; but they do not equal the Tourainers with baskets of eggs and couples of fowls to sell. Yet not at Tours, as elsewhere in the old cities of France, does the grand old cathedral of the place look down upon a parti-coloured host of buyers and vendors. The market squares are remote from its chiselled towers and the myriad of statuettes which adorn its superb façade.

Scenically, matters might be much more sensational than they are in this district drained by the Loire. Here and there long ridges of reddish or whitish soil break from the level land, with desirable slopes for the vines, and abrupt falls where they approach the river's banks. The feudal lords—English for the most part, in those days—of half-a-dozen centuries ago marked the value of such building sites. And still, as then, the gloomy donjons and the scarcely less sombre conical towers of their castles stand forth strongly against the blue sky

From some points several may be seen at once, their turrets and spires like sheaves of masonry. Everywhere they are suggestive; from Chaumont—where Henry the Second and Thomas à Becket met in 1170 for the last time—to Loches, whence in the ninth century the Plantagenets issued to a world destined subsequently to know them by heart. No buildings in France are more redolent of the vigorous, high-handed doings of bygone days, from fighting and sieges to courtly intrigues, brawls and worse in the name of religion, cowardly bloodshedding, and the love that Kings bear their Queens and the most beautiful of their subjects.

But the district is not all vineyards and castles and riverside meadows. There are tracts of forest in Touraine, though the Briton at large in the province may be tempted to scoff at a Frenchman's idea of forest trees. Between Chenonceaux—that gem of Touraine's castles, now occupied by a rich West Indian—and Amboise—whose iron gratings the Guises once strung with human corpses—there is for example a charming wood, with a white road climbing to it in easy terraces, and showing gay green vistas on either hand, where the forest tracks go endlessly east and west. It is a lonely enough road nowadays, though in the sixteenth century France's monarchs used it as much as any in the land. Diana of Poitiers also gave it a certain amount of notoriety in her movements from one to another of the castles which were the reward of her beauty. If one meets a frantic cyclist or a country cart in a mile on it in the present day, one does pretty well. For the most part, it seems reconsecrated to the natural solitudes which were first disturbed three or four centuries ago.

The glades of this forest are of themselves sufficient to convince the unprejudiced Englishman that we at home have not the monopoly of sylvan graces. The trees here are large, for France, and the undergrowth is thick. From the forest's depths blue jays flit across the white road, with its kilometre and tenth of a kilometre posts, and the raucous cry of many a pheasant proves that the omnipresent notice forbidding the stranger to “chase” has justification. It is excellent to make this walk in the evening of a hot September day, when the scent of oak bark comes forth vigorously with the first token of the dew, and the sun glows like a ball of fire at the end of the western rifts in the forest, which seem carved out expressly to do it honour.



The forest clothes one of Touraine's many ridges. With the descent to the north, corresponding to the ascent from Chenonceaux, Amboise's graceful, cathedral-like pile appears in the distance, flanked by its older feudal towers and the huge walls which have so significant a meaning. Soon the forest is left behind, and again we are in the midst of vines, whose purple and pale sea-green grapes are provocative of sinful longing. They are a generous people, however, these Tourainers. Do but hint to a cottager that you envy him his flowers, or admire his grapes, and he will fill your hands with roses and set himself to seek a cluster of fruit to show that he appreciates the compliment of your admiration. The peach-trees here are but another of Touraine's particularly good, and toothsome, points. Peaches at three halfpence a pound will seem an attractive lure, but you cannot know how attractive until you have feasted on this fine fruit, matured, like the Tourainers themselves, in the open air, face to face with the sun. Down in Amboise, under the shadow of the great castle, one marks how thrifty they are in the exploitation of their tiny garden patches. A yard but three or four metres square is made to rear vines that not only yield a delightful trellis-work arbour beneath which to sit in the dog-days, but grapes almost plentiful enough for pressing. The blacksmith may if he pleases make a wine and label it with his name; and his neighbour the road-mender may do likewise, and run the blacksmith hard in that race for distinguished labels which is such a feature of competitive existence among French wine-growers.

One must come to Touraine also to understand something about that noble river, the Loire. What a breadth it has even here, scores of miles from its mouth: with islands and sandy shoals and countless bridges to dignify it! And how patiently it provides sport for the great army of French anglers, who like nothing better than to sit on a grassy knoll dangling a worm in the water, protected from the sun by a large green or white umbrella! The dear enthusiasts do not seem to mind much about the tastes of the fish they catch, so they can catch them. They may be seen at Blois and Tours angling industriously in the soap-suds between the civic laundries and the shore, undisturbed in spirit by the tumultuous clatter of the bare-armed matrons and maids who lean over the sides of the anchored barges, and thump

the linen with an energy that argues them no weaklings. There is something quite ludicrous about a Touraine angler's joy in a big fish. Three mornings in succession we discovered a crowd of these enthusiasts leaning over a bridge, staring at and apostrophising a certain graceful "barbillon" which whisked its tail in defiance of all fish-hooks. One blue-smocked old fellow was in the same bent attitude on each occasion. "Un beau morceau, monsieur!" he exclaimed elatedly to every new-comer, and he proceeded to tell almost tearfully of the impossibility of tempting this "fine morsel"—a good eighteen inches in length!—into the initial step towards the frying-pan.

September, however, is not a flood month. One sees then vast reaches of bared, pale pink sand in the Loire's very midst. But it is easy to imagine how its majesty is trebled after a stormy and wet week or two. By Marmoutier, for instance, where once stood an abbey of far fame, now in charming neglected ruin, you may see inscriptions which tell of the floods of 1846 and 1856, when the river far overswept its banks, and turned this vine-draped ruin and its adjacent inhabited houses into an island. There are tourists who canoe down the Loire to Nantes. This must be a memorable excursion, and at no time better than when the grapes are ripe—and settled sunshine is expected—may it be planned and put into enjoyable execution.

A different kind of river altogether is the Indre, which meanders placidly by Loches. It is not very wide, it is a clouded green in colour, and it bears patches of water-lilies on its smooth surface. It passes many a quiet village with ancient church spires and dilapidated castle relics. Its meadows blush with crocuses, and it provides idyllic pleasure for those who have boats to row on it, and amiable lady friends to accompany them. You may see several such parties during a two or three hours' stroll along its green banks, even where there are few signs of local population. The slim poplars whisper over them as if they were in sympathy with them; and there are plenty of inlets with green bowers to retreat into from the noontide sun, and to provide romance with its most winsome opportunities.

Yet when all's said, Touraine in September pays little heed to its rivers and castles, and even the visitors who come with money in their pockets and circular tickets for the round of its palaces. The

grape harvest is, in fact, about to begin. Will the weather hold good, as it ought, for this all-important function? This is the question of all questions now. Hailstorms, such as occasionally mark April or May in letters of red ruin, cannot be expected; but there may be a tropical downpour or two which shall bruise or even burst the teeming grapes by the million. Every one rejoices in the prospect of a successful vintage, but there is no knowing if hope may not be flouted. Certainly, if one may judge from the clusters at the various tables d'hôte and the offerings of freeholders, Touraine has no cause for anxiety in this particular season of 1894: some of its clusters would do credit to a hothouse. Yet the unforeseen does so often happen, and it is as well not to be too sanguine, even though the sunsets every night are as auspicious as possible.

After a few days in Touraine one comes to realise that though its noble castles are much—indeed, very much—with their façades and portals so exquisitely

Carved with figures strange and sweet,  
All made out of the carver's brain,

though they are much, the grapes are more. Touraine was formerly ruled, often tyrannically, by its castles. It now lives benignly by its vineyards.

### HEALTH.

THERE are two things which are, perhaps, to be desired above all others—money and health. Which is the more desirable of the two is not easily determined. For, while it certainly is true that money can buy health, it is also equally true that there is health which not all the wealth in the world can purchase. And, again, while even millions are of no account without health, perfect health has all it requires though confronted by a scarcity of pence. It is true that, just as the moneyed man tells you that the thing he needs is health, so the healthy man cries out for cash. But in health, as in sickness, there are degrees. A man may be healthy in the positive degree, and have many wants; it is doubtful if he who is healthy in the superlative degree wants anything. For consider what perfect health is.

It has been said that no one can be morally healthy who is not physically so. In a certain sense this is a plain statement of a plain fact. Health is a matter of equipoise; of a whole, the several parts of

which must be equally balanced. If one part is heavier, or lighter, than the others, then the whole is unbalanced, and therefore flawed. It is obvious, if we reflect, that moral qualities cannot safely be developed at the expense of physical ones. A physical wreck may be a moral saint, but, the more closely one studies history, the more one suspects that it is precisely saints of that sort who have given birth to a preponderating proportion of the immorality with which the world is troubled. On the other hand, a person in the enjoyment of perfect physical health must be sound upon the moral side, because perfect physical health necessitates perfect balance, and perfect balance is an equation of sanity. Immorality is a want of sanity. An absolutely sane person will only do sane things, and, immorality being insanity, only moral—i.e., sane—actions will come within the compass of his methods.

Looseness of speech is a peculiarity of our common conversation, as, for instance, when we say that "so-and-so is in good health, and always has been, yet look at the crimes he has committed!" We, many of us, do not stop to think what good health really is; are content with a superficial appearance; do not stop to probe into details. A physiologist, whose business it is to be accurate, will almost certainly tell us that so-and-so is not a healthy man; that in something which makes for health he is wanting.

It may seem startling to assert that a healthy man can hardly be an immoral one, and for this reason: because, while the sound body is the affair of nature, which never varies, morals are the playthings of man, who changes with every wind that blows. The standard of physical health, from the point of view of nature, must always have been the same, in all the countries of the world; the standard of morality, on the other hand, is not only different in different places, but, in each place, it is always altering. Thus, because the natural man has natural instincts, those moralists who have constructed for themselves an unnatural code, tell us that he is depraved—oblivious of the fact that it is in themselves that the depravity exists. The pother which fills the air, causing men and women to exhibit their folly in vain contentions about vice and virtue, is merely a symptom of physical ill-health. The age is an unhealthy one; were it not so, there would be no such pother. In an unhealthy host, the healthy unit is not likely to be a

popular one; the exhibition of his robust constitution seems to be a reflection on the frailties of his fellows; they resent it, and, in their unhealthy fashion, do their best to leave on him the marks of their resentment.

The sound mind in the sound body is not prudish. It is an illustration of the degree of unsoundness to which we have attained, to state that such is our present-day prudery that it is difficult, in a journal intended for popular reading, to state precisely what perfect physical health actually means and is. Certainly there is not in Great Britain to-day an individual who may be described as being in the possession of the ideally perfect physical health. One might go further and say that there never has been such a one in all the earth.

It is, sometimes, remarked that the nearest approach to perfect health which is discoverable in the world to-day, is found among savages. But this may be doubted. Possibly certain savages, like certain animals, have so habituated themselves to the conditions of their existence that they can endure them better than any one else. But to admit that is to admit little. There are some fine men among the Zulus, men of inches, of steel, who never know what it is to suffer a day's ill-health between the cradle and the grave—so long as they remain in Zululand, living the lives to which they have been born. Transplant them to London, require them to live the lives of British workmen, their health would vanish like snow in summer. Take the workman to Zululand, constrain him to live the Zulu life, you would find that he would flourish much better in the Zulu's place, than the Zulu would in his. You say that that is because the workman would be reverting to natural conditions, while the Zulu would be making his first acquaintance with the unnatural? That is not the only reason, nor, indeed, is it the chief one. The workman is an example of the survival of the fittest. He is the fruit of a long line of ancestors who have, at various periods, been accustomed to all sorts of conditions. Place him where you will, the chances are at least equal that he will thrive there just as well as he would at home. The Zulu is the representative of progenitors who have known only one set of conditions. Those have remained unchanged from sire to sire. Until now they have become the creatures of those conditions, so that, when those pass, they themselves must cease to be.

It is difficult to describe what health,

even in the positive degree, is; it is easier to say what it is not. It is not, necessarily, strength. The popular notion that an athlete, because of his athleticism, is a healthy man, is a delusive one. Muscular developement is not an affair of the constitution, it is an accident. Strong limbs and a weak heart are, not infrequently, associates. Many a "strong man" dies, prematurely, of consumption. If health may be defined as a capacity for holding on to life, then, in many cases, the weaklings are the healthiest. If such a definition is accurate, women are healthier than men; their average length of days is greater than ours. But it is doubtful if centenarians, merely because they are centenarians, are the healthiest. I knew a case of a woman, who recently died at the age of a hundred and five, who was slightly paralysed even as a child, and who was, practically, completely so for more than seventy years. Could such a one have ever been correctly described as healthy? It is as hard to say what life is as to say what health is, and the way in which unhealthy folks are tenacious of life is not the least of the marvels.

Health, as common conversation understands it, is not, as a matter of course, a condition of length of days. We say, and so far as medical knowledge goes, we know, that A has a good constitution, that B has a bad one. They live the same lives, walk the same paths, and even, if you will, think the same thoughts. Yet, suddenly, A ceases to exist, while B still is. Of all mysteries, the something which we call life is the most mysterious. The more we pretend to know of it, the more we expose our ignorance. We know not why it is, nor where it is, nor how it is. We are wholly at a loss to adequately explain why, or where, or how it continues in the frame of the paralytic, while from the body of the man with a sound constitution it passes, as it seems to us, prematurely away.

Health, some one has said, is freedom from pain. There is something in that. The man with a toothache, while it lasts, can scarcely be a healthy man. The severer the toothache, the less his health. If your finger hurts you, to the extent it hurts you you have lost your health. On the other hand, it is by no means certain that a man is healthy because he is free from pain. He may think that he is, and we are constantly being told that if a man thinks he is well, he is well. This position, while, in one sense, nonsense, in another approaches

very near to wisdom. There is an inexplicable connection between faith and health, and the sick man who persuades himself that he has health is likely to be nearer it than the healthy man who persuades himself that he is sick. Still, because a man is free from pain, and therefore thinks that all, physically, is right with him, it, unfortunately, does not necessarily follow that it is—as many such a one has learnt when he has endeavoured to effect an insurance on his life. We may be without the semblance of ache or pain, in the best of spirits, full of faith in the good which the years shall bring us, and yet already sick unto death of the disease which, perhaps in another minute, will cause us to be numbered with the great majority.

What is colloquially understood by health is sufficiently comprehensible. We say, "We envy Smith his good health; he has never had a doctor in his life." What is meant is, that Smith is a man who possesses a fairly decent temper; who seldom, or never, is conscious of physical suffering; and who, so far as we are able to judge, passes over both the rough and the smooth places with a smiling face. By many of us, such a one is to be envied. He is, probably, blessed with a good digestion—which is about as desirable a possession as a man can have. Possibly some three-fourths of the ills which afflict mankind have a more or less remote connection with the digestive organs. He who can, within fairly reasonable limits, eat and drink what he pleases; who can adapt himself to the requirements of modern life without inconvenience; who can sleep at will, and rise refreshed; who never knows those dark hours which are the bane of the dyspeptic; that man is the owner of a treasure, the full value of which he will not know till he has lost it. If Smith has a good digestion, that one thing approximates him very closely to the up-to-date ideal of a healthy man.

A man with a good digestion ought to be a hero; it is very difficult indeed to be heroic if you have a bad one. Valour has more to do with the stomach than the poets allow. He can scarcely be bad-tempered; if he is, he will not have his priceless treasure long. He ought to be an optimist; was ever a pessimist who had not some acquaintance with indigestion? If ever the competitive system becomes universal, and rulers of states are chosen by examining boards, that a candidate must have a good digestion should be held to be a "sine qua

non." Incalculable mischief has been wrought by monarchs who have experienced stomachic troubles. Single-minded justice and rigid impartiality can be expected from no man who is worried by his liver.

Although the aforementioned Smith may be very far indeed from being an absolutely healthy man, still we are justified in wishing that more were like him. To such a state of things have we come that it is only a minority of those persons who have attained to riper years, who have as much cause to congratulate themselves on their physical condition as he has. The duration of life, it may be, is as considerable as it has ever been, but life is not everything, and the existence which is dragged on in continual association with drugs and doctors is one which, "per se," is barely worth the having. There are some rare spirits who, Mark Tapley fashion, rising superior to their surroundings, racked by bodily afflictions, still have a gay heart, and move bravely to the grave. But when one does meet such, one is inclined to ask oneself if they would not have played a finer and a more effective part on this mortal stage if they had had a more considerable acquaintance with physical ease.

The average invalid is a hopeless and a helpless being, a burden to himself and others. It is a hard, but an actual truth, that ill-health is, as a rule, a synonym for selfishness. The thing is natural enough. Though we may be slow at confession, we are all self-centred. We are all of us, to ourselves, the most important items the world contains. If our horizon is bounded by a chamber of sickness, we are apt to insist, so far as insistence is in our power, that the horizon of all with whom we come into contact should have the same boundary as our own. More, the chronic invalid is not seldom disposed to resent, almost as if it were an offence towards himself, better health in another. After all, the point of view is to be excused, we being mortal. What we have not ourselves, we are not anxious that others should have. We have only one life to live; what does not come into our life does not come near us at all. It passes by on the other side. It is not in touch with us, nor we with it. Strive as we may to achieve concealment, we never can utterly destroy a feeling of antagonism towards that which, much to be desired though it is, we know never can be ours.

Medicine—the reiteration is always either before our eyes or in our ears—has made gigantic forward strides. It may have done,



and yet one wonders. Sanitary science has revolutionised society; and yet folks die just as they ever did, and suffer quite in the good old fashion before death comes. The surgeon may perform an operation with a skill and a courage which, to his predecessor of a hundred years ago, would have seemed miraculous, but the physician can do little more for us than he ever could. We frequently hear of new and startling discoveries in medicine, but, for all practical purposes, they come stillborn from their discoverers. Small-pox decreases, and the doctors point their fingers and say, "See what we have done for you." Influenza, pneumonia, or the latest fashionable novelty in complaints, comes instead. Which is the better, let the doctors decide.

The continual contest which is carried on against the devastations of disease has its comic side. There are the hosts of widely advertised nostrums which are guaranteed to cure all human ills; and the more the ills are cured, the more the hosts increase. There are the legions of professional gentlemen who are above and before all things sticklers for etiquette; who warn us against empirical pretenders; who assure us that Allopath is our friend, not Homœopath; who earnestly entreat us not to pay our money to any one who is not legally authorised to notify the registrar that we indeed are dead. And yet is there one of us who does not know that, in spite of the whole queer army, when his hour comes he will die?

There are services which a physician, as apart from a surgeon, can render us; but the longer one lives, and the more one moves about the world, the more one begins to suspect that these are services which any one, with common sense and a fair amount of experience—i.e., empiricism—could perform for us. Professor Huxley proposed some time ago that there should be a test of the power of prayer. Doctors and scientific men generally, so they tell us, are fond of demonstrations. Would it not be an interesting and instructive experiment if there were a test of the power of doctors? Take, haphazard, a number of people of both sexes and of all ages. Divide them into communities. Let the doctors of each nation have a community to themselves—this division would be indispensable because the difference which exists between the treatment prescribed, say, by a French and by an English doctor has to be experienced to be believed. Let the allopathists, the homœopathists, the hydropathists, the thousand-

and-one sets of medical faddists, all have a community of their own. Give the nostrum mongers free hands. Suffer the faith healers to work, unimpeded, somewhere, their own sweet will. And, amidst the whole number of the communities, permit one to be set apart in which no doctor of any sort or kind—regular or irregular—shall be allowed to place a foot or to have a voice. If such a test were feasible, I wonder what the result would be. Or rather, I do not wonder; I should like to have a wager depending on the issue. I would wager that, all things being equal—position, climate, circumstances, constitution, ages—the physical history of all those communities would be pretty well of a muchness. They would all suffer from the same diseases; would beat them, or be beaten by them, in much the same way; and would die at about the same age. Of this I am certain—and in this I believe that the physicians themselves would be upon my side—that the medically supervised communities would be every whit as closely acquainted with pain, disease, and suffering before the curtain finally fell as that one community in which no doctors were.

And yet it would be rash to say that, in the struggle for health, the doctors are of no assistance. "Every Englishman who is born alive"—is it not something like this that Mr. Gilbert sings?—"is born a little Liberal or Conservative." Some of us are born to go to church and some to go to chapel. Nearly all of us are brought into the world to lean on doctors. They usher us on to the scene; they usher us off it; between the rising and the falling of the curtain they walk perpetually by us, observing us with watchful—one would not wish to write with hungry—eyes. It is singular with what facility many people become the creatures of habit. They go to church because their fathers always went, and they themselves have always been, but without having any real knowledge of the why and the wherefore, though if they did not go they would be conscience-stricken and unhappy. In the same way, and for similar reasons, when a case of sickness occurs, they call in the doctor; they themselves not knowing why—save that it is their habit so to do—but taking it for granted that he does, while the doctor—adequately to bear his part in the comedy—does his best to prevent their guessing that he does not. If it is a case of cure, he assumes the credit to himself; if it is a case of kill, why, that is the visitation of God.

Still, on such occasions, the doctor is of assistance now and then, and in this way—he is a “comfort.” “It’s such a comfort to think,” we are told, “that the doctor came at once; that he was in and out of the house half-a-dozen times a day; that he was here when the poor dear died.” Strangely enough, these people mean precisely what they say. It is true that the treatment did not do the patient an atom of good, but, from their point of view, it is a comfort to think that he did have the best advice. Their fathers always had the best advice; they have always had the best advice; they will take care that every one connected with them always does have the best advice. In fact, to have sickness in the house and not to have the best advice is indecent; almost as bad as not going to a “place of worship” on a Sunday. To these sort of people doctors are of assistance. As they very correctly say, they cannot do without them. But, so long as it is the kind of article to which they are accustomed, or which is in the fashion, it is a matter of indifference whether the representative of medicine has his credentials from the College of Physicians or from the College of Quacks. The betting is about even that in either case the result will be the same.

No doctor can give us health. No doubt, if a man has injured his constitution by excesses, a doctor can tell him that, if he discontinues those excesses, his constitution may be restored to him; but it does not need a doctor to tell him that, though numbers of people who find themselves in such a plight seem to think it does. If you have injured yourself by overwork, or by overdrinking, or by overeating, or by putting an undue strain on your physical powers of any sort or kind, you do not need a doctor, if the injury has not gone too far; if it has, not all the doctors in the world can help you. If you live a healthy and a natural life, and exercise your own common sense, you need never call in a doctor during the whole course of your existence; if you do not, a multitude of doctors will make no difference. If, from any cause whatever, you have entirely lost your health, no doctor will be able to give it back to you; just as if you never had good health, no doctor will be able to give you what you never had.

“Give us”—we shall do no harm by playing echo to Solomon—“neither poverty nor riches, but——” we shall do well to add, by way of a rider of our own, “give us health.” Health, even, in the positive

degree. It is a gift which must be bestowed on us by nature; else not all the wisdom of the schools can give it us, nor by taking thought can we obtain it for ourselves. Since it is a moot question if health is not a synonym for happiness, it is obvious that it is a thing worth having. Yet it is a precarious possession. Whether, conjoined with brains, it is likely to endure longer is not so certain. The clever man is apt to destroy his constitution quickly; the ploughman, whose strength is not in his wits, preserves his to the end. With an impaired constitution the faculty of enjoyment diminishes, until it altogether disappears. Why one continues to live when one is no longer able to enjoy, one can but wonder. It is certain that if those who have lost the capacity for enjoyment were to die to-morrow, the earth would be scantily peopled.

The sky is only blue to us while we have good health. It is only then that the light of the sun is pleasant, and nature smiles. It is only then that we are able to find delight in the varying traffic of the hour, in the phantasmagoria of the passing show. We are pleased by trifles in our vigorous days, there is magic in a woman’s eyes. Our spirits rise at least as quickly as they fall, we are swift to see the silver lining to the clouds. We realise that, indeed, the sun is always shining somewhere in the world; and if it is not quite where we are standing, why, it will be soon. The days are short, the nights not long; if now is winter, to-morrow brings us roses, and then what a sweet rapture is in the roses’ smell. How much is in the world worth doing, and some of the doing surely will be ours! There is nothing we encounter which does not contain within itself possibilities for brightening, at the very smallest estimate, the moments which are flying. The fruits of the earth, how good they are; and how pleasant a thing it is to eat when one is hungry; and what strange tales people tell about the foods which disagree with them, and which they dare not touch! Why, there is nothing which the cook can place upon the table of which we have any fear while we have health.

But with the advent of ill-health, a more sombre note comes in the voices. The sun shines more seldom then; sometimes we wonder if it ever shines at all, anywhere: and when it does shine, what we notice chiefly is, that it is trying to the eyes, and how it wearies one. How slowly the time does pass! And yet when one

looks back at the days which are gone, how little one did in them. But then, what is there after all that is worth the doing? Or what does it matter what one does? All things, sentient or otherwise, move towards oblivion. We are but the corks on the stream; of what consequence is it what course we steer? For all of us alike there is the cataract at the end. As for the so-called joys of life, they are but the tinsel on the puppets. Women are snares, and men are false; while to speak of the pleasures of the palate is to talk rank folly. It is with pains of the stomach we are better acquainted—when our health is gone.

So, Nature—Universal Mother!—give us health, and in giving it give us also the faculty of keeping it. Knit it strongly into our being. Gird us with it round about. So make it part and parcel of ourselves, that being life's co-equal, it shall not quit us till death comes. Number us among those whom thou hast blessed; suffer us to continue hale and hearty until we return to thee.

Is there a petition which man can fashion the granting of which is much more to be desired than that?

### OUR FIRST CASE.

#### A COMPLETE STORY.

We were sitting in our little room, looking at each other. A week or two ago we had set up independently. We had come here to make our fortunes, but private nurses did not seem to be in much request in this benighted place. All the doctors knew of us, and had welcomed us cordially. With one consent they had said that we were just what was wanted here.

"Do you think we can afford to stay another week?" asked Kathleen.

"Perhaps, one more," I answered.

"It's a most interesting experience," she said.

"And will end in quite an exciting finale," I added. "The worst of it is the return home amidst the jeers of our friends, who are expecting us any day."

Kathleen shuddered.

"We may get a case in the next few days," I said; "such things occasionally happen."

"Give me another cup of tea, Agnes," cried Kathleen; "it is ruinous to the nerves, but I must have it. If any of my patients drank half so much as I do, I should read them a lecture they would not forget, but——"

Our landlady flung open the door, and Dr. Puckle burst in upon us.

"Ah! I was so afraid I should find you out," he cried. He was Irish.

"We happen to have a holiday," said Kathleen. "At least, we have no very urgent case on this morning."

"Allow me to give you a cup of tea," said I.

"Tea? Tea at this time of day!" He shook his head at us. "I should have thought you knew better, nurse. Never drink tea at eleven o'clock. No sugar, thank you."

He settled himself comfortably before the fire, and sipped his tea, while delivering himself of a long and strong dissertation on the evil of this habit. Kathleen and I corroborated every word he said.

"Well, now to business," cried Dr. Puckle. "I came to ask you to undertake a case, a very painful case. It's old Josiah Hartland. Ever heard of him?"

"No," I answered.

"That man would have been dead a year ago if he hadn't happened to—ah—live. This time he'll go. Meanwhile I must get a couple of nurses for him, by hook or by crook. Will you undertake his case?"

"Tell us some more about him, doctor."

"He lives in Hartland's Hollow. I suppose you know that part?"

"No," said Kathleen, and Dr. Puckle looked relieved.

"It's a trifle lonely, but I suppose you don't mind that?"

"Not in the least," said I. "We are neither of us troubled with nerves—in spite of the tea."

"You'll find no one there but the coachman and his wife, an old couple. You'll have to do everything yourselves, I'm afraid. When can you be ready? The case is urgent."

We promised to go that afternoon, and, when Dr. Puckle left us, Kathleen and I held a little celebration in honour of our first case.

We found ourselves before a low, rambling building at four o'clock that afternoon. The walls were thickly covered with ivy and creepers; tall trees surrounded it, which lent an air of mystery to the place. A solemn hush was on it, and the chilly afternoon fog was rising.

"I hope there's a good fire," whispered Kathleen, shivering.

The sound of the bell was muffled, and seemed to come from underground regions. We had to ring three times before any one

thought of answering our summons. Then the door was opened suspiciously, and an old woman peered at us out of her spectacles.

"Oh—be you the nusses?" she mumbled. "You may come in."

"How kind!" said Kathleen in my ear; "don't you feel gratified, Agnes, by this gracious permission?"

She waited till our traps were deposited in the hall, then shut and locked the door.

"One never knows what may happen," she murmured, speaking to herself. Her candle cast suspicious shadows round the low, dark hall. We could smell the dust of ages as we followed the housekeeper upstairs. She told us, in passing, the different rooms, and informed us that some of them were haunted, but she didn't rightly know which.

"What a delightful house!" said Kathleen, aloud, and her voice echoed far away and disturbed the brooding silence. I wanted to hush her, for I kept feeling as if I were at church. "So cheerful!" rang out her voice.

"That's your room," said our guide, stopping at the top of the stairs to breathe, "and that's the master's." With that she turned and went into the dark regions we had left behind, and we found ourselves standing in a passage lighted by a single small lamp, with our bags in our hands and our hearts beating rather rapidly.

"I thought there must be something queer about it," said Kathleen, "Dr. Puckle was so very reserved."

"It is charming," I affirmed. "Now, shall we introduce ourselves to our patient or to our room?"

"Our room first," said Kathleen; "let us keep the best treat till the end."

It was not an ideal room which had been prepared for us, nor overclean, but, as Kathleen said, we were both able to scrub a floor after our hospital training. She threw open the window, lighted both the candles on the dressing-table, and then declared that it was fit for the Queen.

"But horribly cold," I supplemented.

"Well, my dear, wait till it's aired before you shut the window. When that old hag's lighted our fire it won't be half bad."

"It strikes me," said I, "that we may as well light it ourselves, if we want one at all."

"There seems a superabundance of insects and crawling things," said Kathleen, examining the corners of the room. "I'm rather fond of spiders. Are you?"

"On the whole," I answered, "I prefer my bedroom free of them."

"That is a pity," said Kathleen.

"Let us now go and make the acquaintance of our patient," I suggested.

Our gentle knock was not answered, so we went in unbidden.

Josiah Hartland was lying in bed breathing heavily. He was an old man. His skin was as yellow as a London fog, his eyes were so sunken under shaggy brows that at first sight he seemed to have none. The room was comfortless in the extreme. The fire was nearly out, and an untrimmed lamp smoked upon the table by his bed. He turned and stared at us.

"Two of you!" burst out a sharp, thin voice, startling us. "Two! I don't want two, one's quite enough. I'm not going to pay two to do the work of one."

"But one of us has to sit up with you at night," said I, in a cheerful, soothing tone.

"What do you want with sleep?" he growled; "a great, strapping girl like you ought to be able to do without it. Has James come in?"

"Who is James?"

"James, he's my coachman, of course. Who else did you think he was? Ring the bell, can't you? I tell you I want James to come up. He's been collecting my rents; I want to see him about them."

"It's rather late in the day to be doing business," said Kathleen.

He turned and stared at her.

"Who's that?" he asked, pointing at her with a bony finger.

"She is your other nurse," said I.

"Send her away, then. One's quite enough. I'm not going to pay two nurses, I tell you. I engaged you, but I never engaged her. Send her away!"

"Just now," I answered, "I am going away, and your second nurse will stay with you. I shall sit up with you to-night, so I am going to rest now."

Kathleen followed me to the door, looking slightly scared.

"I wish you joy, dear," said I. "We have a delightful case for our first!"

When I awoke from my nap, I found Kathleen by the fire in our room, and a nice little meal waiting for me.

"Don't thank Mrs. Jones for that," said she, "or expect to find such things growing in this house. If you are hungry, you must go and forage about in the larder for something to eat; if you haven't got the genius which distinguishes everything I do, pro-



bably you won't find anything. At all events, partake freely now, for you have a long night before you."

She was very tired, and I left her to sleep as best she could in our spider-haunted room.

I was simply astonished at the change Kathleen had wrought in the sick-room. The only thing which seemed the same was our patient, and he looked cleaner. Kathleen afterwards told me that she had never found it so difficult to persuade any one to let her wash him.

"Has she gone?" asked Josiah.

"Yes, she's gone to bed," said I.

"Gone to bed! Whose bed? I won't have her sleeping in one of my beds."

"Yes, it's all right," I said, "and now you must let me settle you for the night."

"You aren't going to wash me!" he cried, "the other one has just done it."

"No, no, it's all right, I won't wash you again to-night."

When he had taken his medicine, and was settled comfortably, I sat by the fire in the darkened room, and strange thoughts came to me. How was it that my life had drifted into this? Five years ago I was a thoughtless girl, with scarcely a care beyond dress and pleasure and friendship. My friends thought it eccentric to "waste" my youth like this! They were amused, and could not see through my desire to do something useful in the world. However it was, here I found myself, a girl who had been shielded from all the roughness and trouble of life, in the very presence of suffering and death, playing an important part in the tragedy which I felt sure would end soon, for I knew the look of death so well that sometimes I saw it with scarcely a shudder. Our patient did not seem conscious of his condition. He lay there, in his large and lonely house, without one friend or relative beside him. It was a sad case for our first!

It grew more and more silent. An ash fell out of the grate, and it sounded as if a thunderbolt had burst. I jumped in my chair, and felt a thrill all down my back. Then I began to think of the lonely situation of the house, and the distance between the two old caretakers and me, if anything should happen. After a while the silence teemed with countless noises. I heard a long swish, a queer wailing—more like a human cry than the wind—a pitter-patter, a buzzing, a faint tapping, a sigh. And there was a long creeping thud every now and then.

I am not superstitious. I firmly believe that superstition is the result of ignorance, and that educated people ought to despise it. But—I began to feel as if perhaps there was more than I had thought in some of those superstitions. Surely they could not have lived through centuries if there had been no truth in them!

"Go and fetch me my rent-book."

I nearly screamed. His voice had come so suddenly upon my thoughts.

"D'ye hear?" cried the thin, high voice.

I tried to persuade him to lie down and go to sleep, but he grew so excited that to quiet him I was obliged to yield.

"Where is it?" I asked.

It was downstairs, in one of those horrible, deserted rooms.

"Wouldn't you rather wait till the morning?" I asked.

"No, fetch it now, now! Besides, then you can look round and see that there are no burglars about. They know I'm ill, and that I've got a great sum of money here. I'm only waiting till I get better to take it myself to the bank."

His voice grew wilder and wilder. He urged me on, and I went, for nothing else could quiet him. I took a lighted candle with me, and, as I found my way down the creaking stairs, my heart thumped against my side.

I am sure I heard a low growl at the foot of the stairs. As the flickering light of my candle moved onwards in the darkness, it seemed to disperse countless shadows that had dim shapes. I thought I saw the outline of a grinning head. Mrs. Jones had said some of these rooms were haunted—supposing this one was! Something scuttled away. I set my candle down, afraid I should drop it, my hand was trembling so. Something fell with a thud on the table, and that was too much for me. Snatching up my candle, I turned and fled. The candle went out, but the feeble flicker of the lamp upstairs guided me, and I stumbled on, not daring to take a breath till I found myself once more in the sick-room. I have since found out that the library was swarming with cockroaches and mice.

Old Josiah had fortunately fallen into a doze, so I settled myself in my chair again, having gently made up the fire. Would this awful night never pass? It was not two o'clock, and it seemed like the beginning of eternity.

Tick, tick, tick! What was that?

Tick, tick, tick!

I knew—it was the death-spider. I had

heard of the horrid thing before, and had not believed in its existence. But I had never before spent a night with a dying man, in a haunted house. I stole softly to the bedside, but he was sleeping nicely. He had several days to live still.

"Well, how did you get on? What sort of night had you?"

Kathleen was like a breeze, her voice swept off the vapours of the night.

"Beautifully," said I. "I have had a delightful night."

"When shall I get better?" asked our patient. "What's the good of paying a couple of nurses and a doctor if they can't cure me quicker than this? Why can't you speak, doctor? Answer me."

"Hartland, it is time to prepare yourself for another world; you cannot get better."

"I must, I must; I've a great sum of money in the house that ought to be banked. And James hasn't got in all the rents. He's a fool at it. Send him up to me at once."

Dr. Puckle told us that this perpetual worrying about his business was hastening the end. He said it could not be far distant now, and Kathleen and I determined to try and get the poor man to think of other things more appropriate at this solemn time.

"You cannot take your money with you," I said, "so why worry about it now? You are dying, Mr. Hartland; surely you can leave your money matters alone. What importance can they possibly be just now?"

"Much you know about business," sneered the old man. "Business is business, whether a man's dying or not." Then he burst out crying like a child. "All my life," he wailed, "all my life I've spent in getting it, and now I've got to leave it! It isn't fair. Send James up to me at once. I want to know whether he's made that villain Richards pay up. Why, the fellow owes two quarters! It's infamous." I looked at Kathleen in despair.

It was always like that. Sometimes he cried and sobbed, sometimes he railed against the injustice of life; his one and only idea was still his money, that money which he had made himself, and which he loved with a concentrated passion. He looked at the cold, useless thing, and never missed the warm human faces that ought to have been round him now. He had no relations, no friends; his money had come between him and all the softer joys of life,

and in dying he cared for nothing except that he had to part with it.

Kathleen stared at the little heap of salt she had spilt.

"What's the matter, Kathleen?"

"Oh, nothing," she answered, starting. "Of course I don't believe in any such nonsense. But I saw a crow this morning—now I've spilt some salt."

"Throw a pinch over your left shoulder," I suggested, laughing at her.

"Goose," she retorted, "do you think I'm so silly?"

I stooped to pick up my serviette, and she made a rapid movement as though throwing something over her shoulder.

"Kathleen," I cried sharply, "put your knife and fork straight."

"Why? What's wrong with them?"

She looked at them, then suddenly snatched up the fork and laid it down beside the knife.

"I do believe you were frightened because they were crossed!" she said.

"Did you hear the screech-owl last night?" I asked.

"No, but I heard a dog howling, and when I got up to see the time, I saw a shooting star."

"Superstition is such nonsense," said I.

"Yes, isn't it?"

I was sitting by him, and in the darkened room I saw his bony hands groping about aimlessly, or picking at his sheet. When I had washed him, he had fretfully declared that we nurses did nothing in the world but wash him, and "the other one" had done it that very morning. I tried to persuade him that the morning had nothing to do with the evening, but he didn't see it. He was now muttering to himself, or lapsing into unconsciousness. He did not know me. His mind seemed to be wandering into the money-getting past, for I could hear snatches of calculations, and something about the Stock Exchange which I did not understand.

Then all was silence, but for the beating of my heart.

There came a tapping at my window. I sat up straight, clutching the arms of the chair. Death himself might have been knocking for admittance! I knew, I was sure that it was but a bird; but I had heard that when a sparrow taps at the window it means death. A few minutes after there sounded a loud crash downstairs, and I sprang up and rushed into our room,

having just presence of mind left to see that our patient had not been disturbed. Kathleen was sitting up in bed.

"Did you hear that noise?" I gasped.

"Ye-es," said she, through chattering teeth. "Do you think there's a burglar here?"

"Well, perhaps you'd better go and see," said I. "I would—but I cannot leave Mr. Hartland."

"Oh," said Kathleen, "I would—but I'm not dressed. What's the matter, Agnes?"

I took her shoes, which she had left on the table, by accident, and threw them down. She started.

"I—I tumbled upstairs yesterday, Agnes," she said, seizing my arm.

There was another crash. I had knocked over a hand-glass!

Next morning a large picture of Josiah Hartland was found on its face in the dining-room. Mrs. Jones said it had fallen several times before, for the cord was rotten and kept breaking; but Mr. Hartland wouldn't buy a new one. We said it had better not be hung again, as we did not like going down to see what was the matter in the middle of the night. She seemed surprised, and evidently wondered what we were here for.

I told Kathleen that she looked pale, and she said I looked ghastly. I asked her whether she thought we could endure another night of it, and she said she could not, but if I liked I might stay, and she would give me all the profits.

There was no need for us to stay.

Mr. Hartland insisted on looking at his rent-book to see whether James had collected all the rents. I brought it to him, and he groped about with his hands to feel it.

"I can't quite see," he moaned; "my eyes—they aren't so good as they used to be. Read it to me, you nurse. What are you here for, wasting my money, if you can't read to me?"

"Let me read something else," I entreated, feeling tears rising in my eyes. "Kathleen, bring me a Bible."

"Business is business," gasped the dying man; "read the last page to me. I want to know—whether—that villain—what was I saying?"

Kathleen came nearer. We looked at each other.

"What do you know about—business?"

He glared at us, and struggled with his

breath. His hands wandered over the quilt. They touched the rent-book. A grin crept over the wrinkled face, and fixed there. His eyes rolled and shut.

"Agnes, now we can go home," whispered Kathleen, creeping to my side.

## RICHENDA.

By MARGARET MOULE.

Author of "*The Thirteenth Brydain*," "*Catherine Maidment's Burden*," "*Benefit of Clergy*," "*The Vicar's Aunt*," etc. etc.

### CHAPTER XX.

It was two days later, and late in the evening. A neighbouring church clock was just striking nine as Jack Leicester turned into the street in which was the building that held Sir Roderick Graeme's flat. His face, always rather pale, looked much paler than usual. There was a worried, much-harassed look on it that accorded very ill with its boyish outlines, and the shrewd eyes were clouded with anxiety and doubt. He made his way up the long staircase of the flats rather slowly and wearily. His usual practice, when calling on Sir Roderick, was to spring up two steps at a time, with a cheery noisiness which did not always meet the views of the other dwellers in the building who caught the sound. But to-night there was no sign of cheeriness about him, and no suggestion of noise. He knocked at Sir Roderick's door, and was admitted. "Sir Roderick would be in directly, and would Mr. Leicester wait?" was the message the servant had received from his master, and Jack went into the smoking-room, and flung himself down in the nearest chair. He put his elbows on his knees, and, resting his chin in the palms of his hands, sat motionless staring steadily at the carpet.

Jack had spent two of the longest days in his life; days that had been filled, from morning to evening, from beginning to end of his day's work, with perturbation, indecision, and great anxiety. On the morning of the second of these days it had seemed to Jack that he could no longer maintain, alone and unaided, the weight of responsibility which, since his interview with Norton, and his subsequent meeting with Kennaway, had sat so heavily upon him. He had turned over in his mind again and again the possibility of finding some one with whom to take counsel. For a long time he had not been able to think of any one who might be willing and able to give him advice in his emergency.

Richenda and he had no relations. Her "society" friends were comparatively inaccessible to Jack, and, as even his judgement instantly decided, they were not likely to be of the least help had it been otherwise. He could think of no one but Norton. But though they were excellent friends, he had never been really intimate with Norton; nor did he place confidence enough in a man so slightly his senior to ask him to share a responsibility of this kind. Into the midst of his perplexities the sudden thought of Sir Roderick Graeme had come with a strong ray of hope. He was, to Jack's mind, the very person he needed; even if he could give no definite help, it would at least, Jack argued, be of some use to tell him the whole; and Sir Roderick would certainly be able to produce some sort of counsel, some suggestion to guide him in his perplexed anxiety. He had accordingly sent forthwith to Sir Roderick to say that he should go to his rooms that evening and hoped to find him at home; and the message he had just received was his answer.

He was wondering now, as he sat staring at the carpet, how he should place the whole case before Sir Roderick. He had not quite made up his mind what he really thought of it all, himself. It is needless to say how often in the past two days Jack had tried to arrange and define his own point of view. But it had always been in vain. Again and again he had returned to the same uncertainty and indecision.

Things looked convincing against Kennaway, he said: that is, the facts certainly almost amounted to convincing proof of Kennaway's interest in and connection with the woman in the hospital of whom Norton had told him. Jack had been quite keen enough to see that Kennaway had been greatly disturbed and annoyed at their meeting each other, and he had been in no wise taken in by his pretext of business in the locality. But, still, it all might be a most extraordinary series of coincidences. It was possible; just possible. Nothing more could be done until the points of the whole were proved: namely, who and what the woman was, and why Kennaway wished, as he evidently did, to keep the whole thing to himself.

Jack was turning this all over for the twentieth time, and trying to decide whether he should say to Sir Roderick that he believed the worst of Kennaway, or whether he should not commit himself at all until he had stated the case and heard what Sir Roderick said or thought, when the door

was quickly opened and Sir Roderick himself came in.

"Sorry I've kept you waiting, old fellow," he began heartily. "The more so as I'm most awfully glad you've come. I am——"

Sir Roderick broke off short, and the hand that he was just going to bring down in welcome on Jack's shoulder, fell back by his side.

"Great Scott, Jack," he said abruptly. "what in the name of fortune is the matter? You look as if you had all the cares in the world weighing on you. What's wrong?"

Jack had risen, but he had not spoken, and before he could do so, Sir Roderick spoke again. An idea seemed to strike him, quite suddenly, and his face grew oddly set.

"There's nothing——" he began hesitatingly:

Then he went on quietly:

"Jack," he said, "Jack, it isn't your sister? There's nothing amiss?"

"Richie's all right," Jack said quietly, "so far as that goes. I'm dreadfully bothered, though, and it's about her. I want you to help me, Graeme."

"To help you? You know I will, if it's to be done."

Sir Roderick sat down as he spoke, in a chair opposite to Jack's, on the other side of a little table that held pipes and ash-trays. He took up a pipe-case, and began to play with it, half in anxiety, half in impatience.

"Tell me what it is," he added hastily.

Jack had resettled himself also, and was again letting his eyes mechanically follow the pattern of the carpet.

"I can't quite tell how to put the case to you," he began. "I don't know exactly what I think about it myself. But, Graeme, look here, you don't believe in Kennaway a bit more than I do, in your secret soul, now do you?"

"You didn't come here to look into my beliefs, did you, old man?" said Sir Roderick drily, with a sharp snap of the pipe-case fastening. "And what has Kennaway to do with it?"

"Everything!" Jack answered wearily.

"Everything?"

"You said you were bothered about your sister, I thought; you don't mean—— Good heavens, Jack, you don't mean that Kennaway is daring to—to play any tricks in connection with her?"

Sir Roderick was bending forward in his



chair as he spoke, the leather case clenched tightly in his strong hand, gazing at Jack with staring, eager eyes. Jack's face was not visible; it was again bent on the carpet. But he raised it suddenly as Sir Roderick said impulsively:

"Speak, do! In the name of all that's good don't say he's done that!"

"That's precisely what I don't know," Jack answered slowly; "precisely what I want your advice and help about."

"Look sharp in telling me how to give it."

Sir Roderick was still leaning forward, and his other hand was now holding hard the arm of the wicker chair he sat in.

"Come to the point, Jack," he said almost sharply.

"Well, I believe I'd better tell you the facts just as I know them, and let you form your own judgement on them."

"I don't mind how you tell me, so long as you do tell me."

Sir Roderick's voice was very tense, and his expression very anxious.

"It was two days ago," Jack began. He spoke slowly, as if he were considering how best to present the simple truth, uncoloured by his own deep anxiety and his doubts and difficulties. "I had just knocked off work," he began, "when Norton stopped me—you know Norton, you saw him in my study one day; he's a good sensible fellow enough, a lot above me as to standing, but he's been a friend of mine since I was a little chap. And it was because he was an old friend he thought he ought to speak to me. It was—he meant it no end kindly. This is what he told me." Therewith, in few but very clear words, Jack laid before Sir Roderick the substance of the account which Norton had given him concerning "the accident" brought into the hospital on that day. And, further, a careful account of his own meeting with Kennaway at the corner of the street immediately afterwards.

Sir Roderick listened in perfect silence. He had not moved an inch. When Jack began to speak he was still sitting in his intent, leaning forward position, one hand on the chair, the other clenched on the pipe-case; and he had not by so much as a hair's-breadth altered that position when Jack, after describing Kennaway's expression as well as he could, paused for breath. His face was many degrees paler, his breath was coming rather thickly, and his hand was so tightly clenched round the wicker as to make the knuckles stand out white.

He did not speak in the pause; but Jack apparently did not expect comment, for he did not wait for it.

"Of course," he went on reflectively, "I shouldn't have felt half so bad about it as I do feel if it hadn't been for meeting him there and then on the top of it all. I should have thought there was some sort of mistake, some rum coincidence or other; but for seeing him, and seeing him look as he did look—for all the world like something caught in a trap. I've thought it all over ever since without stopping, till I felt I must have some one else's advice and help and so on. I couldn't, for the life of me—for that matter I can't yet—see what I must do. At first I couldn't think who I could possibly find to talk to; then I thought of you; I wrote to you straight away; and I've come to you to hear first what you think of it; then, what you think I ought to do. I know," pursued Jack humbly, "that I'm young and all that sort of thing to look into it; but Richie's got no one else but me, and looked into it must be, I suppose."

"Looked into it shall be!"

The words came from between Sir Roderick's nearly closed lips, with an emphasis that made them into a sort of defiance to anything and any one who might oppose his intention.

"You think there's something wrong, then?"

"Think! I don't know what to think! I only know that you or I, or both of us, must and shall take steps to know all about it, down to the veriest detail."

Sir Roderick had risen from his chair, and pushed it back with a vigorous gesture as he spoke. He began to pace rapidly up and down in front of Jack. His face was set into the most rigid lines it had ever worn; his blue eyes held a dangerous gleam, and his mouth was compressed as Jack had never seen it before. Jack remained in his chair, waiting for the other to speak again. But Sir Roderick took three long silent turns up and down before he did speak.

"If his record isn't all right—if this thing is what it looks, Kennaway and I will have a reckoning—a reckoning founded on an old score," he muttered.

Jack looked at Sir Roderick half in surprise, half in doubt. He did not know how he had expected his friend to take his story, but he had certainly not expected him to betray so much personal interest, and so much emotion. A supposition that

had more than once crossed the shrewd boyish mind, came to it again now; and he very nearly, on the impulse of the moment, put it into words. But a steadier impulse corrected the first. Jack decided that he would do better to "let well alone," as he expressed it; and he turned his mind back to consideration of the serious question in hand.

"It may be all right," he began dubiously, "it may be that I've made a fool of myself in fussing over it. But, as I said, I'd rather look into it, if you'll say what steps I'd better take."

Sir Roderick gave a little laugh that was sardonic in its grimness.

"It may," he said tersely. "Oh, I grant you, Jack, it may. But we'll see the truth proved before we say any more. The next thing we can do will be this."

He threw himself down into a chair and began rapidly to detail to the listening Jack his proposed course of action.

#### CHAPTER XXI.

"JACK dear, don't you think you could spare half a quarter of a minute?"

"I really am most awfully busy. I truly haven't any time."

Richenda Leicester was kneeling by the fire in her drawing-room, warming her hands with a pretty movement. Close to the table on which he had hurriedly and rather noisily set down his coffee cup stood her brother Jack. The brother and sister had been dining together, quite alone; Mrs. Morris was kept in her room by neuralgia; and the twins, being absorbed in school preparation at dinner time, always dined earlier and separately.

Tête-à-tête dinners between Richenda and Jack were of very rare occurrence. Even if, as at present, Mrs. Morris chanced to be absent, some one else was almost certain to be present in her place. Among Richenda's new acquaintances were many girl friends, and very often indeed one or other of them dined at her house; sometimes as the end of a quiet evening spent with Richenda; sometimes as the prelude to a party or parties to which Richenda and the girl in question would probably go, under the wing of the same chaperon, who would "pick them up" at Richenda's house. Then there were many evenings on which Fergus Kennaway brought friends of his own to dine, and in an unobtrusive but decided manner, made himself more or less master of the ceremonies. Therefore,

thus broken up as all her evenings were, Richenda had welcomed this occasion with a great deal of pleasure. There were only about three weeks now left for her of her life at home with her brothers. Her marriage with Fergus Kennaway was to take place in the middle of April, and this was the last week of March. Her brothers were to live with them still, in Fergus Kennaway's house; but the old life, in which she and they had been alone, had only that short time more to run. This would very possibly be her last solitary dinner with Jack, she had thought as she dressed for it. And she had accordingly put on her prettiest gown and come downstairs prepared to make the most of the occasion. And she had sat down at the pretty, luxuriously appointed dinner-table with this intention foremost in her thoughts. She had talked and laughed; she had made Jack give up his usual place and come and sit beside her; she had devoted herself to him. But to her surprise, and greatly to her disappointment, her overtures had met with no response. Jack had not even seemed to notice the fact that they were dining alone together at all. She had thought he would be so pleased—so excited, even—at the chance of having her to himself; and he never even alluded to it. All through dinner he had been absent, distracted, and almost—though Richenda scarcely owned it—irritable. She had begun in turn every one of the subjects she thought most likely to interest him; and after a brief monosyllable or two he had let each drop in turn. A little flush of surprise and disappointment began to find its way to Richenda's face as she found each of her efforts to please and interest Jack thus repulsed. She tried again and again, but each time with less and less success; and at last, with a hot face and shining eyes, and a grievously disappointed heart, Richenda, at the end of dinner, had taken refuge in a silence which Jack did not attempt to break.

In the drawing-room, when she had given him his coffee, she had knelt on the fender stool, hoping that he would bring his cup to the fireside, and stand or kneel beside her. Perhaps, she thought, now that the servants were quite gone, he would be different. Perhaps he was only waiting to be quite alone with her to be his own brotherly self. But he had drunk it hurriedly, standing beside her, and had murmured something incoherent about being obliged to go away immediately.

"Oh, Jacky," she pleaded in response to his protest. "Dear Jacky, you said you weren't so dreadfully hard at work just now, and it would be so nice if you would come and sit here and talk to me a little."

"I can't," he said brusquely. "I really can't, Richie."

"Oh, but why?" she said, turning towards him, while she still held out one hand to the fire. "I haven't seen anything of you for ever so long, somehow. And, Jacky dear, I haven't got so very many evenings left now, you know."

Jack had turned his back to his sister, and a strangely gruff and wholly inarticulate sound was the only response he made to this.

"Do. There's a nice, dear boy," she begged. "I'll love you ever so much if you will."

"I can't," he reiterated still more brusquely. Then, as a little chiming clock on the mantelpiece struck a quarter past nine, he said hurriedly: "I told Graeme I'd come and see him this evening, Richenda, and I must go. He'll be waiting for me."

Without another word or look at her Jack went hastily and awkwardly out of the room, and a moment or two later Richenda heard the front door close heavily behind him.

For a moment or two Richenda knelt where she was, staring at the red-hot coals. Suddenly she became conscious that things were growing misty before her eyes, and with a little jerk she let herself fall into a sitting position on the fender stool upon which she had been kneeling. Her hands fell heavily on to her lap, and the tears that had made the fire misty stood visibly on her long eyelashes. She sat without moving for some moments, staring steadily at the fire. Then two or three short, tearless little sobs broke from her.

Richenda could not have accounted at all for her tears or her sobs; she could not have told why she felt, all at once, both lonely and unhappy. Indeed, she did not own to herself that she was unhappy; she simply let herself think, as she sat there looking into the fire, without making any effort to check or guide her thoughts. Perhaps, though, it would be truer to describe them as feelings than thoughts. They were feelings that had held their place in Richenda's heart for a long while, though never before to-night had she been definitely conscious of their presence there. Jack's refusal to stay with her had been, so to speak, the finishing touch which had

roused them all into reality, and made her sensible of them.

For several weeks now Richenda had vaguely known that the near prospect of her wedding brought her no real happiness at all. She had half-unconsciously shrunk from the contemplation of the fast-shortening interval. She had never wondered why she felt thus; she had not reasoned about it at all. She had simply felt it, and tried to put the feeling away from her as fanciful.

But it had refused to be wholly put aside. Every fresh detail of her preparations, every interview with her dressmaker, every necessary decision as to furniture in the house Fergus Kennaway had taken seemed to bring it forcibly before her again. These decisions were invariably made in Fergus Kennaway's company, and at his request; and it was on these occasions, even more than on those of her more personal arrangements, that Richenda felt that vague reluctance to think of the prospect before her. Behind her knowledge of this fact lurked on her mind a terrible shadow of fear; fear which she had never dared yet to let herself realise for an instant. She feared, nay, she knew, in the inmost recesses of her heart, that the strengthening when with him of her distaste to the prospect of the future, arose from the creeping distaste she was beginning to feel for Fergus Kennaway's personality. It was so terrible to her even to imagine this, that she drove the suggestion forcibly from her with dread and haste, always.

Nevertheless, its practical effects remained, and Richenda, had she questioned herself, would not have been able to deny that the few days when she and Fergus Kennaway did not meet were to her more of a relief than a disappointment. These were very few indeed. Kennaway spent with her, either at home or elsewhere, almost every evening and the greater part of every day. He was only more solicitously and sedulously attentive as the days of their engagement ran out than he had been at its beginning. The crumpled little note from him, which was at this moment in the pocket of Richenda's dinner dress, contained profuse apologies for his absence this evening.

"Most unexpected business" had detained him, he said. "Business connected with our marriage," he had added with a lover-like turn to end his sentence; and Richenda, when she read it, had crumpled up the sheet and thrust it away with a short sigh and an odd little shiver.

But all this only formed a background of

dissatisfaction to Richenda's thoughts now. She was not thinking of Kennaway, nor of her marriage. She was thinking about, or rather, as has been said, feeling, the influence of Jack's parting words.

He was going to Sir Roderick Graeme, he had said, and somehow Richenda did not know how or why, but from his words, and from her temporarily lonely position in the room, there rose before her a picture of that afternoon when she had been alone in the New Gallery, now so nearly a year ago; the afternoon when everything had been so different, and when Sir Roderick Graeme had first made her happier by his attention, and then made her so hurt and so wretched by his change of attitude. As she sat there, she was, half in a dream, going over all that afternoon again. She had often and often done this before, both in her old life and her new, dwelling with indignantly hurt pride on every detail of Sir Roderick's change of manner towards her; and always ending the remembrance with the same feeling—a feeling of wounded pride and bitter injury. This evening, however, for the first time, her recollections brought to her none of her former sensations. This evening she did not once dwell or wish to dwell bitterly on Sir Roderick's conduct. She felt nothing now but the odd thrill which Sir Roderick's first seeking her out had produced in her. For the first time now she smoothed over and tried to explain to herself his hitherto unexplainable and unforgiveable conduct; and she dwelt oddly on his face as it had looked when he

first came up to her. She remembered only how pleasant his smile had been, and how perfectly simple and frank his expression. This was followed, and it seemed as if the picture arose out of the hot coals, by a second picture of his face, changed and altered as it had been on the snowy afternoon when he had called, and she had been both harsh and cold to him. She had scarcely, save for their chance encounter on the door-steps, seen Sir Roderick Graeme since that day. He had never again called upon her, and she had not happened to meet him at other people's houses of late. And though, as she well knew, his visits to Jack were very frequent, they never included any notice of, or meeting with, herself.

A sudden, overwhelming wave of regret swept over her. Sir Roderick was gone out of her life; she had sent him out of it; and now, she said to herself with a quick breaking down into sobs for the second time, now Jack was gone from her too. He cared more to be with Sir Roderick, whose friendship she had despised and thrown away, than he cared to be with her. He could not love her, said poor Richenda, with a pitifully childish unreason, or he would have stayed with her. She had lost Jack, too, and there was nothing left to her, nothing now, but Fergus Kennaway. She raised her head from her hands, and stared again at the fire with very wide, wet eyes, while she played with trembling fingers with her little tear-stained handkerchief. Then she suddenly let it fall again, and cried as a tired, unhappy child might have cried.

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